



# Enlightenment through understanding

Teachers are on the frontline when it comes to fostering international - mindedness. Kath Stathers looks at global examples of effective practice, and finds out what the term means to those who must deliver it

While other organizations might talk about 'global awareness' or 'international relations', for the International Baccalaureate, the key phrase is 'international mindedness'. This distinction is not mere semantics: the term 'mindedness' is very important in defining the IB learner's approach.

Ian Hill, IB deputy director general, argues on page 16 that understanding that people of different backgrounds hold different views – and examining why they hold them – is integral to an internationally minded education:

"This is what leads to understanding and respecting another point of view without necessarily accepting it – knowing where it came from."

While other organizations might talk about 'global awareness' or 'international relations', for the International Baccalaureate, the key phrase is 'international mindedness'.

"The manipulation, misrepresentation and misinterpretation of nation, culture and religion might be the greatest intellectual and moral challenges that our students face as adults," says Julian Edwards, secondary principal at the New International School of Thailand, about his understanding of the term. "Our students need to be able to rationalize what is most likely true about the present, but also to 'mind' – in the sense of 'care' – enough about the future to dream up plausible alternatives and enact them."

---

## Get an early start

So, 'mindedness' is about having empathy and not just knowledge. It isn't something that is taught in any particular class; instead it is so embedded in the way an IB student learns that it becomes part of their consciousness. And it can start as soon as they begin school. "Even aged three in the nursery, children know that not everyone's the same," says Sarah Harris, Primary Years Programme coordinator for the Western Academy of Beijing, China. "We get the point across that there are many, many differences between people, and foster a culture of respect."

Although the school's intake of more than 50 nationalities makes it easy for pupils to understand the notion of different cultures, it also works hard to connect the children's learning to the host country and to celebrate Chinese culture as part of a wider world. "How it is done has to come from the teacher," says Sarah. "Usually it's richest when they've already taught a unit, then they go away and think about how to bring international-mindedness into it."

"We get the point across that there are many, many differences between people, and foster a culture of respect."

Sarah Harris - Western Academy of Beijing

Last year, for example, when teaching symbolism at year 3, a Western Academy teacher wanted to explore the subject through Chinese culture, so she invited along some members of a Chinese ethnic

minority — the Miao — who told traditional stories, and brought in clothes and jewellery that were laden with symbolism for the children to try on. In physical education, she also introduced Wushu, a Chinese martial art that is rich in symbolic actions.

---

## Harnessing parent power

Sarah believes teachers are attracted to IB schools by the opportunity to make different cultures such a core part of their job. “Teachers are given the opportunity to make decisions about the curriculum,” she says. “They can be explicit about the international-mindedness aspect and really make it a focus. It’s not something hidden.”

She has created a series of podcasts on different IB themes, including international-mindedness. Originally, they were to help new teachers to immerse themselves, but they have proved popular with parents, too. Involving parents is beneficial not just for continuing themes at home, but some regularly come in to the school to demonstrate aspects of their own culture. “Parents are a great resource,” says Sarah. “We’ve had them in to cook with students or read to them in different languages. One dad came in and taught Finnish folk dancing to the kindergarten.”

Julian Edwards also recognizes the importance of getting parents on board. “We are teaching approaches to leading a good life and not just habits,” he says. “So it’s extremely important to engage parents. I know parents who can articulate how involved they consider a school to be with its host country. Now that is a great result!”

“We are teaching approaches to leading a good life and not just habits,” he says. “So it’s extremely important to engage parents. I know parents who can articulate how involved they consider a school to be with its host country. Now that is a great result!”

Julian Edwards, secondary principal at the New International School of Thailand

Approaches to international-mindedness will differ from school to school. Julian, who has taught at three international schools, says: “IB schools have huge connections and similarities. They also have quite specific contexts. Some aspects can seem more conspicuous than others. In Tanzania, perhaps, it was the concept of service, in China the feeling of ‘otherness’ and engagement with the host country. And in Thailand, we have a target to approach international-mindedness at three levels – global, personal and social (or community).”

Julian’s school has launched a special challenge to build ‘mindfulness’ in students, who must set themselves targets that will connect them to their community at these three different levels. “It is hard to genuinely care about saving the planet if you don’t care about the students next to you in class, the old lady who cleans the street in the morning or your own sleep patterns as a Diploma Programme student,” says Julian. “Being ‘mindful’ at one of these levels helps make mindfulness at another more likely.” Students have been setting personal goals around their individual aspirations or their approach to learning, while the social and global goals are tackled in service or action-related projects. “I guess in some ways what we’re doing is giving a ‘branding’ to international-mindedness,” says Julian.

---

## Keep an open mind

This ability of individual schools to interpret international-mindedness in their own particular way is something that Nélida Antuña Baragaño, IB regional director for Africa/Europe/Middle East region, welcomes. “Personally, I am more in favour of open-mindedness,” she says. “International-mindedness is part of that but it’s restricted because it’s related to nations. Open-mindedness starts at home and can be applied to any context at any moment.”

Nélida believes the way the IB syllabus is taught helps to develop this open-mindedness. “It’s not just a teacher standing in front of the class telling pupils what to think. Student input is very important too. It’s very interactive,” she says. “They’re not just given one set of facts in history, for example, but diverse options of facts.”

One student in the United States who has recently started the IB Diploma Programme having been at a regular public school gives a clear example of this, when he says that in history at the public school he'd always written about 'we'. As soon as he began studying the Diploma Programme history course, he had to write about the USA in the third person, as the syllabus examined the country in the context of world history. "Even with mathematics, where two plus two equals four, the way you present it will make it richer," says Nélida. "You can make the connection with different cultures, by explaining how mathematics is very old in Eastern cultures, and that builds cultural knowledge and enhances open-mindedness."

As IB examiner Guven Witteveen of Michigan, USA, puts it: "Staff acting as role models, and case studies, are still the most powerful way to instill global awareness in students. These things demonstrate the value of exercising respect, curiosity, and mindfulness of context when trying to understand a person or an organization's behaviour."  
"When you feel responsible, your mind is open,"

Nélida Antuña Baragaño, IB regional director for Africa/Europe/Middle East

In 1968, when the IB was developed, international-mindedness was seen as a key ingredient in how education could bring cultures together and create a more peaceful world. Today, it is more important than ever. It is not just conflict resolution that can benefit from greater understanding, but industry, communications, what we buy in our supermarkets and what we wear on our backs. Through international-mindedness, the IB teaches students to take responsibility. "When you feel responsible, your mind is open," says Nélida.

*IB World Magazine, January, 2008*